

# Protests and social media posts

Dutch youth claiming their citizenship in the climate crisis

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## Introduction

The heavy rains had slowed down to a drizzle as I unlocked my bike. I counted myself lucky as the sky seemed to be clearing as I made my way to the parliament building. Little do I know that two hours later, I would be soaked to the bone and shivering on my way back home.

The night before, a post on Instagram had caught my eye. It was a picture of a girl, all on her own in front of the parliament building, surrounded by cardboard signs and wearing a raincoat. The caption read that her name was Julia, and in the last three days to the election, she would be skipping school in order to raise awareness for the climate crisis, just like Greta Thunberg did in Sweden. Why would anyone skip three days of school in a row and sit all alone in front of a building? It has been pouring with rain lately, who would endure this cold, just to make a point?

With these questions in my mind, I cycled to the parliament building. As I neared the building, I saw two small figures on the marble steps near the back entrance of the parliament building. The building was closed off by white fences and a Marechaussee van blocked the entrance. The two figures, one wearing a bright red raincoat and carrying an umbrella and the other wearing a dark blue raincoat and pants, were surrounded by a plethora of cardboard signs, some of them already soaked by the rain. I parked my bike across the street and checked by phone, unsure of how to approach them. I took a deep breath, a little nervous, and crossed the street.

'Hi,' I greeted the two. I recognized the figure in the blue raincoat as Julia but the boy in the red coat was unfamiliar to me. Both were wearing face masks, as a precaution during the COVID pandemic. 'I saw your post on Instagram and was hoping I could ask you a few questions for my thesis.'

She nodded and said I could join them. The boy introduced himself as Casper, a friend of Julia's. I sat down on the marble block next to Julia and told her I admired her for sitting in the rain for three days straight.

One of the first topics we discussed were the upcoming elections. Julia was not old enough to vote yet, but Casper was and he had a lot to say about the different parties. The first question he asked me after I said down and introduced myself was which party I was planning to vote for. I answered that I was still doubting between GroenLinks and Volt, as both had a clear climate policy. Casper asked if I had ever thought about Bij1, a new political party focused on

diversity and inclusivity and I answered that climate change was the highest priority for me and I did not think they were involved enough with climate change, as they were focused more on social and equality problems. What followed was a discussion, which sometimes felt more like a lecture, of Casper explaining to me why I should vote Bij1 as they had the most inclusive climate and social policies, in his opinion. He explained the term intersectionality to me, showing how all social problems were also connected to climate change and vice versa. Julia sometimes chimed in with examples of social problems which were also important to note. We – or more, Casper and sometimes Julia – talked about racism, ableism, climate change, and LGBTQ+ rights and I listened closely to their conversation. They were opinionated about a large variety of topics and seemed to enjoy explaining all different problems to me. Every time we discussed a different topic, the conversation somehow circled back to climate change and capitalism – Casper and Julia both believed that climate change and different social problems could not be solved under the current capitalist system.

Suddenly it started to rain again and within minutes I was soaked, despite my new raincoat. ‘Sometimes I wonder why I am doing this, I’m not sure it is doing something,’ Julia sighed. ‘But at the same time, being in school isn’t much more productive. I’d rather be here doing something, no matter how small my impact.’

Julia was far from the only student inspired by Greta Thunberg, as in 2018 and 2019 millions of school children around the world took to the streets to call for climate action. Through social media, the school strikes of Greta went viral and soon, around the world, protests were organized under the hashtag #FridaysforFuture. (BBC 2019).

After her protests, Greta has been invited to speak at climate conferences around the world. Her speech at the 2019 UN Climate Conference in New York went viral. She put politicians on blast for pushing climate change problems off onto children and youth. “How dare you? I shouldn’t be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean, yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you?” (Guardian News 2019). Her speech expressed a feeling present in millions of youth around the world. Climate change is framed as a threat for future generations (United Nations 1987), and many children and youth feel like the problem is pushed onto them to be solved, instead on the politicians, policy makers and businessmen working today.

In 2019, climate strike protests were also taking place in the Netherlands (NOS 2019), often organized by Fridays For Future NL, the Dutch unit of the Fridays for Future organization that was created after the hashtag went viral. Protests were often organized through climate change organizations like Fridays for Future or Extinction Rebellion, but there were also many individually organized protests, like the one from Julia, and online activism in the form of posts on social media. Although the protests and strikes were organized by different actors, the main message was the same: the youth demand a safe future, where the climate crisis has been averted.

Much research has been done on activism and youth activism (Earl, Maher, and Elliott 2017), but not on the specific case of young climate activists in the Netherlands, especially in the current context of a rising awareness for climate change and the upcoming deadline of the Paris Accord. In this thesis, the implications of social media on activism will also be explored, as limited research has been conducted on activism in this context, especially on youth who grew up with social media. There has often been a claim that a ‘digital revolution’ would occur with the arrival of the internet (Miller and Slater 2003), and limited research has been done on the implications for this on (climate) activism. Has online activism replaced ‘offline’ activism or is ‘offline’ activism still the main form of activism? The research and writing for this thesis took place during the global COVID pandemic, which created a new context highlighting online activities, as people had to socially distance and many activities took place online. This produced a valuable insight in what the role of the internet could be in a more digital world.

### Research question

The main research question of this thesis is: ‘how do Dutch youth use online and offline climate activism to claim their citizenship?’

This question is supported by four subsidiary questions, which are each discussed in separate chapters. The first chapter focuses on the concept of citizenship, exploring the theory on citizenship and activism and how the young activist make claims on their rights. The second chapter discusses the narrative created by the activists and how they create and use this narrative. The third chapter is about the definition of activism and the question of what makes someone an activist. In the fourth chapter, the daily lives of the activists is central, discovering how they find the balance between their daily lives and activism, as well as taking care of their mental health during their busy lives. Lastly, a concluding chapter will summarize the main

findings of this thesis. The following sections discuss the methods I used, ethical issues and I will introduce some of the activists I have met during my fieldwork.

## Methods

During my fieldwork, I attended 9 school strikes of Fridays for Future Amsterdam, the Climate Alarm in The Hague, two online debates for the upcoming elections, I interviewed 8 different activists and spend hours on Instagram and Twitter following multiple climate activists and organizations. During these months, I have met inspirational people and had conversations about countless social problems and topics.

The main research methods I have used were participant observation, interviewing and online ethnography.

In order to learn about people's lives and people's own lived experiences, it is important to not only talk to them, but also to observe them and to participate in the actions they take (O'Reilly 2012). Most of my participant observation took place during and after strikes and protests, both individual protests, like the one from Julia and larger organized protests, like the Climate Alarm, the largest climate protest in the Netherlands this year with 40.000 participants divided over 40 cities. I also observed during online meetings and debates, as a lot of activities were taking place online due to the COVID measures. I engaged in casual conversations with activists and bystanders during the protests, learning about their reasoning behind the protest, but also about their own interests and opinions on topics that were being discussed.

Some of the activists I also invited for an interview and I found other activists via messages in climate organizations or via mutual friends. Most of the interviews took place via Zoom, as this was practical and easier to schedule than face-to-face interviews, since most of my respondents were very busy. One interview took place in my respondent's house, as she preferred speaking to me face-to-face, and another interview was via phone call, because my respondent preferred not to be on video.

The last main method used was online ethnography. Online ethnography is a way of participant observation taking place in an online field. When activism increasingly takes place

online on social media platforms and the organization of global protests largely happens through online communication, it is important to go beyond offline participant observation and interviews and connect the offline findings with online materials and experiences (Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Juris 2012; Postill and Pink 2012). Online ethnography, or social media ethnography, is a way to participate in and observe social media groups, online communities and experience online activism (Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Postill and Pink 2012). Social media as a research environment is not limited to a single platform, as people move across platforms and platforms are constantly being linked with each other. Furthermore, social media practices cannot be defined as taking place solely online, as social media also influences people in their 'offline' lives (Hine 2015). People talk about events that happened online, about posts and comments they have read, and therefore carry online information with them to the outside world. This highlights the importance of combining both online and offline ethnography further. By following the social media accounts of the activists I met during protests and strikes, I was able to both study their 'online' and 'offline' presence. I met Julia online, when I found a post announcing her individual school strike on the Fridays for Future Instagram page. Online ethnography was thus also a way to find respondents.

## Ethics

All information I gathered online was publicly accessible, which is in line with the terms and conditions of both Instagram (Instagram 2020) and Twitter (Twitter 2020). Before conducting the interview, I informed my respondents on my thesis via text or email and I told them that they could decline whenever they wanted. The data gathered is processed anonymously and all names in the thesis are pseudonyms. The first three strikes I attended with Fridays for Future, I explained I was conducting research for my Master's thesis and told them what my research would be about (namely young climate activists). After the first strikes, I introduced myself in the WhatsApp group chat with all activists from FFF Amsterdam and told them about my research one more time. Luckily, they were enthusiastic about my research and they were welcoming, explaining things to me when I was confused and telling me about themselves.

## Meet the activists

At the start of this thesis, I introduced Julia. I heard about Julia's protest the night before, when I found a post on the Dutch national Fridays for Future Instagram account, discussing

her three-day strike. I looked at her personal Instagram account and found a post explaining her reasoning for the strike. She decided to strike the three days before the elections to raise awareness for the climate crisis. As she was 17 years old, she was not allowed to vote in the elections, although these elections would ‘decide her future’.<sup>1</sup> Striking was a way to make her voice heard. For three days straight, she would sit outside the parliament building in the Hague from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The week after the elections, she would have her final examinations, arguably the most important tests in Dutch high school. Instead of studying, she would strike, as she felt like making her voice heard and doing everything she could before the elections was more important than her grades. When I met her, Julia was welcoming to me and enthusiastic and happy, despite the heavy rains during her strike. After the strike, we stayed in contact on Instagram, where I followed her strikes and watched cute videos of her cat scattered in between posts on feminism, climate change and Black Lives Matter.

Another respondent who really helped me out during my fieldwork was Janna, who was the first activist I met at the Fridays for Future strikes in Amsterdam. She was the first person I talked to and she has introduced me to the activists present at the first strike. She was 14 years old and had Kung Fu lessons. She often demonstrated her Kung Fu skills using the bamboo sticks used as flag posts for the FFF Flags at the demonstrations. When Olaf was not around, she was often the spokesperson during the strikes, explaining Fridays for Future to curious bystanders and engaging in discussions.

Olaf was also present at most Fridays for Future strikes on Dam square in Amsterdam. He always brought his ‘school strike for climate’ sign to the demonstrations, a sign which was worn down after being used for 10 weeks straight before I joined them. Olaf always tied the sign to his bike, poking a new hole for a string to attach it with. After a couple of strikes, he had to replace the sign with a new one, which also read ‘school strike for climate’. Olaf was also the one who enforced the social distancing rules within the group, reminding us to stay 1.5 meters away from each other and wear our masks. On days he was not around during the strikes, he still reminded us via WhatsApp message. He was also the one engaging in

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<sup>1</sup> Instagram post of Julia, March 12<sup>th</sup> 2021.

discussions with climate change deniers and curious bystanders and he told me he was a proud Marxist.

## Chapter 1: Citizenship and activism



Figure 1. Photo of one of the FFF strikes, picture from @FridaysforFutureAmsterdam Instagram, April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/COBXVJtneyi/>

It was Friday and I was standing with a small group on Dam square in Amsterdam, just like every week. Olaf had his small Fridays for Future flag tied to a bamboo stick and proudly held it in his hands, the small flag waving in the wind. Suddenly two men walked up to us and asked what we were doing. "Fridays for Future" one of them read aloud from the flag. "What's that?" Olaf told them that we were striking to raise awareness for the climate crisis. The man laughed shortly, almost sneering. He asked us what we would do about the climate problem. A CO<sub>2</sub> levy and tax on flying, was Olaf's short answer. There was no tax on flying and kerosine, even though there is one on train tickets and fuel for cars. The man immediately asked how much the tax should be and Olaf answered he did not have the specific knowledge to make a just statement on this and would leave that to the experts. The man asked how high the CO<sub>2</sub> levy should be. Olaf answered that he would leave that to experts, but he believed that a levy should be in place. The man asked him again for a specific number. Olaf repeated his answer. The man asked again, the smile on his face growing larger. The man grinned to the other man to his side and asked Olaf how much CO<sub>2</sub> is in the atmosphere. Olaf answered that an absolute number could not be measured precisely, and it would be more effective to measure the ratio of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere. Again, the man pushed for a specific number. When we could not give him this specific number, he chuckled and said: 'I have a specific number in mind' and

raised one eyebrow. He then proceeded to ask where we got our facts regarding climate change. Olaf told him that 97% of scientists agree there is a climate problem and that there is a lot of research pointing to this. The man laughed again and told us to not just believe science but do our own research. Olaf quickly answered he is still a high school student and would rather leave that to the people who actually studied these topics. Again, the man laughed, saying we should not be naïve, do our own research and not just trust science. He mentioned ‘big pharma’ and how they manipulate research done on climate change to keep people sick and make more money on them. Suddenly the man turned to me, even though he had mostly talked to Olaf before. “Do you want to take the vaccine?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I said unsure where this was going.

“Do you want to have children?”

“Yes, I guess so.”

The man laughed. “Well, that won’t be an option anymore then.” I noticed a sting in my chest as he was implying I would not be able to have children, maybe even implying that I would not be a good mother, as if by choosing a vaccine is to consciously ‘risk’ my reproductive health. Olaf sighed and rolled his eyes and when the men tried to tell us to do our own research again, he suddenly told them to “believe their Facebook facts” but to leave us alone. The men laughed, shook their heads and walked away. Olaf groaned and leaned against his bamboo stick. He told me he was annoyed because they did not take him seriously. “You don’t pay taxes; you don’t get to have an opinion,” he sighed.<sup>2</sup>

The story with Olaf showed some of the obstacles young climate activists can face during their activism, as they were not being taken seriously. This chapter focuses on how young climate activists enact their citizenship and make claim to various rights. Some obstacles they face will be outlined, as well as the ways they combat these negative frames. To explore these questions and the questions asked in this thesis at large, this chapter focuses as a theoretical basis. In the next view sections, the concepts used in this thesis are highlighted and explained. After establishing this theoretical basis, the remainder of the chapter focuses on how my respondents fit within these theoretical frames.

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<sup>2</sup> FFF Demonstration, April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2021.

## Important concepts

The concepts discussed in this chapter are youth, political engagement and participation, citizenship and activism. The topics of online activism and online political engagement and participation will also be touched upon throughout this chapter. First, it is important to establish some definitions for the concepts used throughout this thesis.

### Youth

When talking about youth activism, it is important to be clear about who is considered ‘youth’. The term is highly ambiguous, illustrated by the many different definitions used in academic writing (Barrett and Pachi 2019). Definitions range from 15 to 24 or even up to 35 years of age. However, what is widely accepted as critical for the definition of youth is that it highlights the transition from child to adult. Age is widely regarded as a criterion for social differentiation, and Marx and Engels even called it a universal criteria (Eriksen 2015, 155). Differences in age can result in differences in rank and power, and thus also in expectations. Children and adolescents are still expected to be learning, they still need to be socialized and therefore they are permitted (and maybe even expected) to make mistakes (Eriksen 2015).

One can advance to a different life stage by certain rites of passage (van Gennep 1960; Turnbull 1985; Turner 1969). In a way, the first time you vote can also be seen as a rite of passage or a coming of age ritual. When someone is allowed to vote, they are allowed to have a say in politics. In the quote of Olaf in the vignette above, the first time you pay taxes can also be seen as a ritual: if you are old and responsible enough to pay taxes, you are allowed to have an opinion on these topics. Having not passed through these phases, the activists younger than 18 felt limited and not taken seriously. However, several activists older than 18, and thus allowed to vote, were still experiencing these limitations. This can be because of the liminality of adolescence (Jaskulska 2015). The liminal phase is the phase between the old and the new identity. For adolescence, this phase would be the one between being a child and being a ‘full’ adult. In the liminal phase, one has let go of their old identity, but has not yet reached their new identity. For the youth I met, this meant that although they were allowed to vote, they were still perceived as not yet ‘full’ adults and as naïve.

During the demonstrations I attended, the activists were often literally called naïve and ideological by bystanders, thus they were not perceived as ‘full’, responsible adults, but as

young and ideological youth or children. Even though they were adults because of their age, they were still considered youth by bystanders.

#### Political engagement versus civic engagement

Throughout the literature on citizenship and activism, the terms political engagement and civic engagement are used seemingly interchangeably, denoting similar concepts and the boundary between constantly being shifted and blurred, if there is a boundary between the two at all (Earl, Maher, and Elliott 2017). For clarity, it is important to define these concepts. Again, Barrett and Pachi (2019) provide the most clarity in their book. Political engagement is defined by the engagement with political institutions, processes and decision-making, whereas civic engagement centers around engagement with the concerns and interest of a community, whether one denoted by geography or culture (Barrett and Pachi 2019). As the climate change movement is mostly centered around influencing politics and pushing for sustainable laws and policies, the climate movement can be mostly classified as political engagement.

#### Political participation

Political participation can be defined as the actual actions that are intended to influence politics, thus the concrete actions that often flow from political engagement. These actions can be used to try and influence people that make decisions or content of actual policies and laws (Barrett and Pachi 2019; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2010). Political participation can be divided into two categories: conventional and non-conventional participation. Conventional participation consists of electoral processes, like voting, starting a career in politics, donating money to campaigns or paying taxes (Barrett and Pachi 2019). Conventional participatory modes are institutionalized and routinized, as paying taxes and voting, for example, take place on set moments and in set ways (Iisin 2009). Non-conventional participation does not involve electoral process and can thus be undertaken by anyone, regardless of age (Barrett and Pachi 2019). Among others, this includes protesting, signing petitions, writing political articles. Posting political posts on social media can also be categorized as non-conventional political participation.

It is important to note that although political engagement and political participation are often connected, one can be politically engaged and not participate. For example, someone who

actively keeps up with political news but does not vote is politically engaged yet does not politically participate.

### The citizen

These concepts all connect to the question of who is considered a citizen. Traditionally, citizenship was seen as membership to a certain political community, often a sovereign country (Aristotle 2013; Lazar 2016; Marshall 1983). To be a citizen meant being a member of a certain state and to have all the rights and duties membership to that state entailed (Marshall 1983). Over the years, the definition of 'citizen' broadened to also include others. To have citizenship became defined in feeling connected to a state (Lazar 2016; Lazar and Nuijten 2013; Yuval-Davis 1997). This can also mean that individuals who feel connected to a state can also be defined as citizens. Barrett and Pachi (2019) define this broad perspective nicely: "all individuals who are affected by political and civic decision-making and who can engage with political and civic processes through one means or another." (2). This definition is quite useful in the context of youth activism, as will be elaborated upon later in this chapter where it is further clarified that youth have different methods to make claims than just their official citizenship. It can be argued, that because some of my respondents do not yet have the right to vote, they would not be counted as 'full' citizens. However, they still influence policy making through their political engagement and participation, placing them under the label of 'citizen' according to the definition of Barrett and Pachi (2019).

### Citizenship

As mentioned before, citizenship was often defined in terms of membership to a sovereign country (Aristotle 2013; Lazar 2016; Marshall 1983). To have citizenship meant to have all the rights and duties in a state. However, over the years, broader definitions of citizenship were being developed. This wider approach to citizenship also resulted in a shift from focusing on what makes a good citizen (Lazar and Nuijten 2013) to what citizenship is, how it is produced and which meaning it is given (Lazar 2016). "Citizenship names political belonging, and here I argue that to study citizenship is to study how we live with others in a political community" (Lazar 2016, 1). With this broader definition, citizenship has become more than just a membership to a state (Lazar and Nuijten 2013), as it encompasses the relationship between the individual, the state and society (Yuval-Davis 1997). Citizenship is not only membership

but can also be enacted as claims (Holston 2009; Isin and Siemiatycki 2002; Scholtz 2006; Soysal 1994).

Isin (2009) developed the concept of ‘acts of citizenship’, arguing that simply focusing on citizenship as a membership status is too limited as more and more people try to claim citizenship in a variety of ways. He argues that actors of citizenship do not necessarily have to be people who hold the status of citizenship; they can be a variety of actors. This aligns with Barrett and Pachi’s (2019) broad definition of ‘citizen’, where people who are not an officially recognized citizen of a state can still influence political decision-making. It is important to recognize the role of different actors in claiming citizenship and claiming rights, as political decision-making affects more than just the officially recognized citizens of a state. By using only a limited definition of citizen and citizenship, these actors get excluded from the narrative, although their role can be critical (Isin 2009).

Furthermore, these actors want to claim their ‘rights to claim rights’ (Isin 2009, 371). This means that they want to gain the right to have a say in political decision-making. Whereas Isin discusses the case of immigrants, he argues that the ‘right to claim rights’ can also be claimed by a variety of actors, such as social movements regarding women’s and LGBTQ+ rights. A broader definition of what kinds of ‘rights’ can be claimed using acts of citizenship is also important. Isin recognizes that different kinds of rights are being claimed, not only rights regarding political membership, but also ecological rights for example. These are the rights my respondents claim, or as they like to call them, their ‘right to a future’. <sup>3</sup>

The climate crisis will lead to devastation if not acted correctly, is the narrative of the young activists. By not taking the right actions, politicians are throwing away a healthy and safe future for the younger generation, thus denying their right to have a healthy and safe future. More concretely, this is their right to have a say in the decision making regarding their future, which is now being threatened by the climate crisis. The photo below shows a sign at a sit-down protest, where a single activist blocks traffic with a sign on their body to gain attention.

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<sup>3</sup> This has been mentioned in multiple interviews, but a clear example are the signs protesters used as Extinction Rebellion individual sit-down protests, such as the ones happening June 13<sup>th</sup> 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CQBU3XulhwL>.

These protests are mostly done by activists from Extinction Rebellion. The activist writes down their wish or fear for the future, which is threatened by the climate crisis. On the photo below, the activist has a sign saying: 'I am terrified of having children because of the climate crisis'. Because safety is threatened by extreme weather conditions due to climate change, it can be dangerous for future generations, as they are mostly exposed to these weather conditions, which will only become more extreme over time.



Figure 2 Picture of a sit-down protest, from @ExtinctionRebellionNL Instagram page, June 12<sup>th</sup> 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CQBU3XulhwL/>

By focusing on 'acts of citizenship', anthropologists and social scientists can overall focus on what people *do* instead of *say they do* when claiming their rights. In anthropology, comparing what people say they do and what people actually do is critical, as these discrepancies can highlight social norms (Eriksen 2015). Furthermore, acts are also inherently relational or dialogical, as according to Reinach: "the turning to another subject and the need of being heard is absolutely essential for every social act" (1983, 20). Acts are also disruptive and transformative: they make a difference, they break with 'the script' (Isin 2009, 379). 'The script' consists of institutionalized and routinized social actions which are heralded as the

usual methods to influence politics, such as voting, taxpaying and enlisting. Barrett and Pachi (2019) use the term conventional forms of political participation. For the climate activists, the script refers to the idea that voting and having a political career are the main ways of influencing politics and thus influencing climate policy. The following section dives deeper into the ‘script’ as my respondents experienced it.

Now these concepts have been defined, we can explore how the young climate activist enact their citizenship and make claim to various rights. Some obstacles they face will be outlined, as well as the way they combat these negative frames.

### **“I can’t vote, I can’t go into politics, well... then I’ll take to the streets”**

This quote from Janna<sup>4</sup> illustrates the way young climate activists feel limited in their ways of enacting their citizenship through the political system. In the Netherlands, every four years, general elections are being held to elect members of the House of Representatives (De Tweede Kamer 2021). The 2021 elections were held from 15 to 17 March: right in the middle of my fieldwork period and political parties were busy campaigning. Voting is often highlighted as the most important way to influence politics as a citizen. This is most notable through a campaign launched by the Dutch government to urge people to vote: “Elke Stem Telt” or “Every Vote Counts” (Rijksoverheid 2021).

However, voting is only possible for citizens aged 18 and above. This meant that a lot of my respondents could not vote in the upcoming elections. My respondents younger than 18 felt that their right to have a say in their future was being denied. They experience voting and going into politics as the most common ways of influencing policies, but these opportunities were thus closed off for them. They are not yet allowed to vote or have a career in politics, and could thus feel powerless influencing climate policies. This script was also echoed in climate activism with the emphasis placed on the upcoming election. Because the elections were right in the middle of my fieldwork, this gave me the opportunity to experience climate activism before and after the elections.

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<sup>4</sup> Interview, April 8<sup>th</sup> 2021.

Before the elections, the climate activists put a lot of emphasis on voting ‘green’: voting for parties with a sustainable climate policy in their party program. It was stressed that “we are only two elections away from 2030” (Board member JKB, Klimaatkandidatendebat) and thus rapid change was needed in order to reach the Climate Accord agreed on by Dutch corporations, social organizations and the government. The Climate Accord is an important part of the way the Dutch government wants to reach the Paris Agreement and states that the Netherlands need to reduce its emission of greenhouse gasses by 49% in 2030 (Klimaatakkoord 2019).

The emphasis on voting ‘green’ could be seen by the numerous debates that were organized by youth climate organizations such as the JKB, the Jonge Klimaatbeweging (Young Climate Movement) and JMA, Jongeren Milieu Actief (Youth Environment Active). During the JKB Klimaatkandidatendebat (Climate Candidate Debate), the moderators, the chairman of the JKB and a board member of the organization, stated that it was important to not only focus on the current corona crisis, but also on the climate crisis. “Whilst we are extinguishing the ‘corona fire’, we must not lose the climate crisis out of sight”.<sup>5</sup> The debates were focused on showcasing the climate policies of the largest political parties partaking in the elections and making sure that voters could make an educated decision on which party to vote for to ensure a sustainable government.

Importantly, the emphasis was placed on educating people to make a sustainable decision, but not telling them who to vote for. I also experienced this during the FFF demonstrations before the elections. The demonstrations were used to raise awareness to vote ‘green’, and to put climate as the top priority during the elections and in the four years after the elections, but people were never told to vote for a certain party. When a bystander asked Janna at an FFF demonstration who to vote for, she told them to “vote for a party with a green climate policy”.<sup>6</sup> When they asked her which parties were the greenest, she told them what the CO<sub>2</sub> policies were for GroenLinks and Partij voor de Dieren but did not go into much detail and said she did not know much more about the different policies of all the parties. To limit the advice

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<sup>5</sup> Chairman JKB, Klimaatkandidatendebat February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021, on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itU5aPcQX1A&t=131s>.

<sup>6</sup> FFF demonstration, March 12<sup>th</sup> 2021.

only to ‘voting green’ could help raise awareness for sustainable voting, without pressuring people to vote for a specific party. This way, the climate movement could remain somewhat objective, and people retained their freedom to vote for whatever party they liked without feeling pressured or forced. Doing what works for you was highlighted by some of my respondents as well, as a way to make sustainability somewhat easier to achieve. This will be explored deeper in chapter 4.

For activists who could vote, the emphasis was put on voting ‘green’, but for activists who could not vote themselves, tactics were in place to try to get others to vote for their future. The JKB collaborated with Grootouders voor het Klimaat (Grandparents for Climate) and made a campaign for grandparents to vote for a green and sustainable future for their grandchildren. The organizations also paired up for ‘kiesvoorklimaat’, a campaign calling people to ‘vote for climate’.<sup>7</sup> In a promotional video on Twitter<sup>8</sup>, they tell how 3 million people are still too young to vote, even though the elections are critical for their future. On Instagram, an activist I followed called for solidarity: “We, the youth, are in solidarity with the elderly during this corona crisis. We ask you to be in solidarity with us. Vote for a world in which we can still exist.”<sup>9</sup> Through these campaigns, the youth try to ‘stretch’ the script to encourage others to vote for them, stretching the boundaries of voting. By stretching the script, they try to fill the void left by the limitations of the democratic system: the limitations of not being able to vote for your own future.

When the elections were over, a feeling of disappointment was present within my group of respondents. During an interview, one of them told me they needed a break to recuperate from the disappointing results<sup>10</sup>: the left had lost seats and the greener parties did not gain influence. With the elections passed, it was time to break from the script completely and continue with other methods: taking to the streets.

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<sup>7</sup> Jonge Klimaatbeweging, @JKBOnline on Twitter, March 16th 2021,  
<https://twitter.com/JKBonline/status/1371761509454516225> .

<sup>8</sup> Twitter post @Kiesvoorklimaat, March 16<sup>th</sup> 2021  
<https://twitter.com/kiesvoorklimaat/status/1371951131925024768> .

<sup>9</sup> Instagram post, March 15<sup>th</sup> 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMcsSfoHPkU/> .

<sup>10</sup> Interview, April 15<sup>th</sup> 2021.

### Taking action: youth activism

Around the turn of the century, some scholars were worried that youth were less politically involved, and their political engagement was lower than before (Barrett and Pachi 2019; Delli Carpini 2000; Mann 1999; Wilkins 2000). They were treated as ‘incomplete members of society who must be taught how to correctly engage with politics’ (Earl, Maher, and Elliot 2017, 3). This idea limited youth engagement by assuming that youth were not interested in politics and denying youth a say in their own political socialization. There was a fear that because youth did not go out to vote, policies would not reflect their wishes and needs. At the same time, because the habit of voting would not be established by youth that never voted, the future generation was also thought to become less politically engaged (Barrett and Pachi 2019).

However, this model has been challenged. Other scholars argued that their engagement was not declining, it was just taking place in a different matter: voting is only one way to be politically engaged (Barrett and Pachi 2019). As mentioned before, there are also non-conventional ways to participate politically and influence politics, and these methods seem popular with youth (Barrett and Pachi 2019; Earl, Maher, and Elliot 2017). ‘Youth are not politicized by others; political socialization is something that they do for themselves’ (Earl, Maher, and Elliott 2017, 3), politicizing or political socialization being the way people learn how to influence politics. Instead of politically partaking like the generations before them (through conventional ways), youth have changed to a form of ‘engaged citizenship’ by protesting and partaking in politics in their daily lives (Barrett and Pachi 2019; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2010; Zukin et al. 2006).

In their article, Earl, Maher, and Elliott (2017) set out to explore the role of youth in activism and political engagement. They argue that a lot of the social movements in the United States of America (USA) started at university campuses, such as the Civil Rights movement, the anti-Vietnam war movement, and the women’s rights movement. Nowadays, contemporary social movements, such as Occupy and Black Lives Matter also mobilize many activists at campus sites. They argue that university campuses are beneficial for the organization of social movements because many students live on site and have time between and after classes to discuss and organize (Earl, Maher, and Elliot 2017). McAdam (1988) stated that youth are

more likely to partake in activism, especially high-risk activism, because they are young, unmarried, unemployed and childless; because of this, they have more free time, flexibility and less responsibilities and obligations. At the same time, studying can be seen as a transitional moment in someone's live, as the everyday routines and social networks of students get altered once they start studying at a college or university (Munson 2010).

Some of my respondents also reported this change once they started their studies and moved out of their childhood home. During an interview<sup>11</sup>, Sophie, an activist I met through a message at JMA, told me that at home, she was not allowed to become a vegetarian as her parents did not support this. Once she moved to housing at the university campus, she gained the freedom to regulate her own diet and choices. This means that sometimes, she eats completely vegan and other days, she eats vegetarian. The first few times she returned home to her parents, they still gave her meat for dinner, but after a while, they came around and gave her vegetarian options when she visited. Sophie's mother even told her that "maybe there is no need to eat meat every single day for us" and her sister became a 'flexitarian', inspired by Sophie's actions. This also aligns with what Bloemraad and Trost (2008) said: youth can even politicize their parents, instead of just the other way around.

Schools, universities, family and friends can give youth knowledge, information and feedback, but it is ultimately up to youth to reflect on this and make sense of this information (Youniss et al. 2002). Through the new social network a student builds, the possibility increases that they come into contact with activism. Furthermore, broad social networks can also increase their interests in other social movements (Earl, Maher, and Elliott 2017; Meyer and Whittier 1994). Education and peers can teach youth about certain social issues and family and schools/universities can help students navigate the political system; however, it is up to the youth themselves to decide what to do with it.

Nowadays, more and more of this political socialization takes place online and, according to Mason (2013), social media has become the norm for spreading ideologies and ideas and thus starting activism and protests.

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<sup>11</sup> Interview, March 30th 2021.

## Online activism

In the 1990s, many believed that the internet was the way to the future (Miller and Slater 2003). If anyone wanted to be part of the ‘future’, one needed access to the internet. This was what Miller and Slater (2003) call the discourse of the internet. There was this idea that with access to the internet, everyone would develop the same vision and wish for the future. With internet, one would be able to have access to the global market, finances and unlimited information. However, the internet did not develop into a global marketplace alone, the fastest growing services online were the ones centered around communication with others (Eriksen 2015). The internet was not just meant for consumption of goods or information, but it had also become a medium for social interaction (Miller and Slater 2003; Postill 2011).

With the arrival of the internet, many scholars believed that this would herald a ‘Digital Revolution’, where the Internet would become the most important space to socialize, with online communication taking the place of offline communication (Miller and Slater 2003). With the internet, global communication became faster and cheaper, and this new global connectivity also had local consequences, as Miller and Slater discuss (2003). With this global connection, people’s identities shifted, since they now had the whole globe (or places with internet) with which to compare themselves. In their book, Miller and Slater (2000) show how this newfound global comparison shifted the self-perception of people from Trinidad. People could express their ‘Trininess’ online, even when they were in different countries, in order to find others from Trinidad.

The internet has thus changed the way social relations take place and the scale at which people interact with each other (Miller and Slater 2000). Because of the internet, social relationships can transcend the dualism of local versus global, by creating deep connections with people across the globe. This also changed the way anthropologists ask questions about communities. If everyone of a certain online community is somewhere else, where is the gravitational point of that community? And if people need to log in on the Internet to access the community, to what extent does that community even exist (Eriksen 2015)? According to Hannerz (1996), the internet is an unlocalized ‘network of networks’, which means that we need a different way of thinking about online communities than real-world communities.

However, twenty years after Hannerz' work, Miller et al. (2016) showed how the online world has become an integral part of the 'real' world, as the two have become closely intertwined. This means that the relation between the two needs to be closely studied (Eriksen 2015; Hine 2015). One's life does not only take place online; it also happens offline.

Both scales are interconnected and thus need to be studied in cohesion if one wants to capture people's lives. In order to assess the impact of the internet on people's lives, online research needs to be paired with offline research (Miller and Slater 2000; Eriksen 2015). This offline aspect can also be found in Vokes' and Pype's work on 'chronotypes' (2016). Chronotypes are a useful tool to understand how media objects can connect different spaces and temporalities and to understand how media is embedded within people's daily lives and influences people's understandings and social meanings. The internet and smartphones are embedded in different discourses and ideas about not only modernity and progress (as discussed in Miller's and Slater's (2003) discourse of the internet), but also of repetition, recursiveness, boredom etc. Media objects, most notably cell phones can also be used in the 'becoming' of humans (Horst and Miller 2006), or the creation of their identity and the multiple identities someone can take on (as with the Trini identity in Miller and Slater (2003)). Online, people can alter their outward presentation of themselves, using aliases and the anonymity. People can actively shape the way they want to be perceived online by masking or altering aspects of their identity (Vokes and Pype 2016). Online, people can modify the dualities of closeness and distance and intimacy and superficiality, and as noted before, this can create different types of social relationships. Nyamnjoh and Brudvig (2014) discuss the concept of 'intimate strangers', where online, people share a lifeworld and solidarity, but offline they remain strangers. This blurs the boundaries between both physical and emotional closeness and distance.

The shift to communication on a larger scale also impacted politicization processes as individuals are gained more power and spaces and means to exchange ideas and knowledge. Mason calls this a 'revolution in culture' (2013, p. 44). Internet can offer youth different places to find information and meeting places for others, who one would not meet 'offline', and present independent spaces where youth can discuss and engage with political issues (Kahne, Lee, and Feezell 2013; Xenos, Vromen, and Loader 2014). Castells (2012) also writes about

how the internet helps to transform emotions into political actions by bringing together people for the exchange of ideas and emotions. Social media and the internet have become an integral part of youth social and political engagement and communication.

The internet and more specifically social media have also influenced the way activism takes place: not only by politicizing youth differently than before the internet, but also in the way demonstrations are organized and followed online. In their research on the riots in Ferguson, Bonilla and Rosa (2015) coined the concept of ‘hashtag activism’, to explore the roles of hashtags in the spread of activism online. They discuss how hashtags can be used to express solidarity to the protesters, even when someone cannot physically join them. Whereas social media might look like a disembodied space for engagement, Bonilla and Rosa argued that it can be an important site for stigmatized and discriminated people to voice their opinions, when they are otherwise ignored by traditional media.

However, together with Juris (2012), Bonilla and Rosa (2015) argued that online activism will expand the ways activism is done, creating more dynamic forms of activism, but online activism will not take over ‘traditional’, physical activism, as there are still many physical protests. One of the new dynamics online activism creates, is a shared temporality for people across the globe. Using #Ferguson allowed people to create a shared temporality, especially during the protests and police confrontations. People followed the events in real-time, from across the globe, giving them the feeling of '*participating in #Ferguson*' (Bonilla and Rosa 2015, 7, emphasis in original) instead of just reading about it, because they were reading and tweeting about it in real time, rallying the people on-site and watched live streams of events. They were participating in protests without even being there, creating a shared sense of real-time engagement.

### Fridays for Future

When Greta Thunberg started her school strikes on Fridays, she sparked a global movement, inspiring millions of students around the world to skip school and strike for the climate (BBC 2019). Through the hashtag #FridaysforFuture, youth across the globe (with an internet connection) could follow the strikes in real time and organize their own strikes. As a result of these strikes, the organization Fridays for Future was started, and #FridaysforFuture strikes

have taken place in 211 countries (Fridays for Future 2021a). In the Netherlands, Fridays for Future is active as well, with a national organization (Fridays for Future NL), and different local groups, such as Fridays for Future Amsterdam. With Fridays for Future, youth try to claim a space of their own, where youth's concerns, agency and visions are central. This is reflected in writing about youth social movement organizations. In adult-dominated spaces, the wishes and voices of youth can be dismissed, even when these spaces are aimed at youth specifically, such as youth advisory councils (Earl, Maher, and Elliott 2017). Political socialization directed by adults can be incongruent with how youth perceive and present themselves, which is why some youth social movements start their own youth-centered organizations (Gordon and Taft 2011; Earl, Maher, and Elliott 2017).

Youth-led organizations often have flat hierarchies, with broad online networks and creative actions (Juris and Pleyer 2009). This flat hierarchy can also be found in the structure of Fridays for Future, as told to me and bystanders during the demonstrations on Friday. During the strikes I attended, bystanders would often ask about the organization and how the demos are organized and often Olaf or Janna would explain the structure to them. According to them, Fridays for Future is not hierarchical but divided in groups per city and one national group, Fridays for Future NL. Internationally, the same structure can be perceived: there is one international Fridays for Future and every country has their own organization as well (as well as other more localized units). Even though Olaf and Janna stated that FFF is not hierarchical, I would argue that there still is some hierarchy, as the national (and international) unit of FFF has more say than the local units. Within the unit there is some hierarchy as well, although limited, as some activists, such as Janna and Olaf, led the strikes and the logistics behind them. There is communication between these different groups and often they work together or meet up for larger regional demos. For large national demonstrations and actions, every regional group sends some representatives who organize the national demonstration. For the largest demonstrations, Fridays for Future can also collaborate with different climate movements, such as Milieodefensie and Extinction Rebellion.

Being a youth-centered and youth-led organization, does not mean that there is no space for adults. As Earl, Maher, and Elliott (2017) write, adults can still support the youth movements, by providing access to resources and networks and being role models, mentors and trainers.

One of my respondents is a trainer at Milieudefensie<sup>12</sup>, where she organizes workshops to help youth gain skills in organizing and “climate project planning”, but also trainings in communication and discussions with people outside of the movement. One of my respondents also stated that outside of youth organizations, other climate organizations were also letting youth speak up. When asked why she thought youth were so active in the climate movement she told me that other organizations originally more adult-centered were giving youth the lead. “They say: youth need to take the lead, because it is their future.’ And the whole point of the movement is ‘listen to the youth.’ So, it would be weird if a 70 year old, or 30 or 40 year old would say this. Even with other climate groups where it is less focused on youth, youth still get extra space. Eh, because it is about our story.”<sup>13</sup>

Youth are thus critical for the climate movement, as it concerns their future. The climate movement promotes conventional ways of political participation, by urging people to vote ‘green’, but as many youth are excluded from these conventional methods due to their age, they also take up non-conventional methods of political participation in the form of demonstrations, critiques on social media and mobilization online. In the next chapter, I will dive deeper into the narrative of the climate movement in the Netherlands and explore how they want to mobilize others for their movement, using both online and offline methods.

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<sup>12</sup> Interview, March 30<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Interview, April 15<sup>th</sup> 2021.

## Chapter 2: "What do we want? Climate Justice! When do we want it? Now!"<sup>14</sup>

*Happy new year  
Het is 2020 alweer  
En we zijn met steeds meer en we willen  
steeds meer.  
Wie het kleine niet eert is het grote niet  
weert,  
En wie niet weet wie niet deert.  
Ik drink nog een drankje.  
Proost op het leven.  
De klok slaat twaalf uur, zijn mijn zonden  
vergeven dan?  
We zullen beven, de aarde zal bloeden  
En wie niet betaalt moet zijn schulden  
vergoeden.  
Maar ik wil een toekomst  
Ik wil een kind, ik wil een carrière, een tuin,  
een gezin.  
Ik wil kunnen proeven van echt schone lucht  
Maar de rijken die vluchten, die boeken een  
vlucht.  
En het kan anders, ik weet dat het kan  
Met geloof en een wil en een wet en een plan.  
Ik wil een toekomst, en jij wil het ook  
Of je blijft blind, want waar vuur is, is rook.*

*Happy new year  
De wereld staat in de fik  
En ik zou het willen blussen  
Maar het vuur is groter dan ik  
En ik stik in  
De time, time ticking  
De tijd tijd tikt maar door en je sluit je ogen  
ervoor  
De wereld staat in de fik  
En ik zou het willen blussen  
Maar het vuur is groter dan ik  
En ik stik in  
De time, time ticking  
De tijd tijd tikt maar door<sup>15</sup>*

*Happy new year  
It's 2020 already  
And we are with more and we want more  
Who does not honour small things, is not  
worthy of great things.  
And who doesn't know, doesn't care.*

*I'll get another drink.  
Cheers to life.  
It's 12 o'clock, are my sins forgiven?*

*We will shake, the earth will bleed  
And who will not pay, has to pay for his  
sins.  
But I want a future  
I want a child, I want a career, a garden, a  
family.  
I want to be able to taste real, clean air.*

*But the rich flee, they buy airplane tickets.  
And it can be different, I know that it is  
possible.  
With faith, determination, law and a plan  
I want a future, you want it too  
Or you will stay blind, because when  
there's smoke, there is fire.*

*Happy new year  
The world is on fire  
And I would like to extinguish it  
But the fire is bigger than me  
And I am chocking on  
The time, time ticking  
The time keeps ticking on and you close  
your eyes for it.  
The world is on fire  
And I would like to extinguish it  
But the fire is bigger than me  
And I am chocking on  
The time, time ticking is ticking on.*

<sup>14</sup> Chant used at Klimaatalarm, March 14<sup>th</sup> 2021 and at multiple other protests.

<sup>15</sup> Song lyrics 'Groter dan Ik' by Froukje,  
<https://open.spotify.com/track/2u6twH8SHTv37ctUqQ4iEX?si=d6df207a85fc4652>.

These are the first verse and chorus of “Groter Dan Ik’ (Bigger Than Me) by Froukje. When I attended the Klimaatalarm protest, the largest climate protest in the Netherlands, this was one of the songs being played during the event. The remainder of my fieldwork, the song stuck with me because the lyrics told the story the climate movement wanted to tell. We must extinguish the fire, but it is bigger than me, I cannot do it on my own.

Through the experiences during my fieldwork, such as the demonstrations, climate strikes, Instagram and Twitter posts and casual conversations, I learned how young climate activists I met defined the problem, what their goals were and what solutions they proposed. This chapter focuses on the narrative they created. They spread the story on demonstrations, mostly on social media, using memes<sup>16</sup> and informational posts (further explained in chapter 2). The narrative the climate movement has created is based on scientific research; research on climate change is often used to highlight the importance of the climate debate. Numbers and figures are used to express the urgency of the crisis and as a counterargument to people who do not believe in climate change (as illustrated in the vignette with Olaf in chapter 1). The first section of this chapter discusses the scientific debate on climate change. Climate activists, however, take the debate a step further in their narrative, creating villains as a personification of the causes of climate change. The second section discusses the narrative of the climate activists and highlights the most important villains of the story, namely capitalism, politicians and large corporations (most notably Shell).

Before discussing the narrative, however, it is important to highlight what makes a narrative. A narrative is the story a movement tells to attract people to fight for their cause (Demant and de Graaf 2010). For a movement to attract new members, the narrative and ideology they present need to be attractive and compelling. A narrative is often started by a signifier, an event that is given meaning and is fit into the ideology of the movement, such as new laws or the death of a person. Signifiers are therefore trigger events that highlight the narrative (Demant and de Graaf 2010). For the climate movement, the start of Greta Thunberg’s protests is the most important trigger event that triggered the start of the global movement. In turn, she started her protests after the hottest summer Sweden ever experienced and the

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<sup>16</sup> Memes are online jokes and funny pictures.

upcoming elections, wherein politicians did not have enough attention for climate (Thunberg 2018). These were her signifiers.

### What scientists say on climate change

The Earth is experiencing a climate crisis, with global warming causing harm to the planet in the shape of melting icecaps, a raising temperature and more extreme weather, amongst a wide range of other disastrous effects. According to scientists, this process is caused by human actions and is developing at break-neck speed (Blühdorn 2009; Eriksen 2016; IPCC 2014; Latour et al. 2018; Patel and Moore 2018). These accelerating developments will soon lead to irreversible changes made to the planet (some even argue that irreversible changes are already being made), having negative impacts on the Earth and its inhabitants. Anthropologists and other scientists point to human actions as the root cause for this development, and especially the exponential rise in the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, causing climate change to kick into the highest gear (Eriksen 2016; Patel and Moore 2018). According to various researchers, at the base of the problem lie social issues, such as globalization, neoliberalism and most importantly, capitalism (Eriksen 2016; Latour et al. 2018; Patel and Moore 2018).

The term globalization has become widely used, often implying that the world becomes more interconnected (Eriksen 2016; Murray and Overton 2015). Despite the term being widely used, it has proved difficult to establish a universal definition. Globalization was thought of as an accelerating exchange of capital, innovation and information, enabled by the development of new technologies, both communicative and logistical (such as the internet and better infrastructure) (Daniels et al 2012; Murray and Overton 2015; Ohmae 1995). Some even expected a homogenized global identity. Others, however, argued that globalization creates diversity as well as homogenization, as places are connected differently to the global network. Globalization is an uneven process, connecting some places more than others and spreading both positive and negative effects of globalization differently (Cloke, Crang and Goodwin 2005; Murray and Overton 2015). What can be concluded, however, is that ideologies, ideas, innovations and capital are being transported across the globe more than ever before (Murray and Overton 2015). One of the ideologies being spread across the globe, is the ideology of neoliberalism, and more notably, capitalism (Harvey 2007; Peck and Tickell 2002).

Neoliberalism is a concept referring to the economic paradigm and cultural ideology which is virtually hegemonic across the world (Murray and Overton 2015; Peck and Tickell 2002) and some scientists have even argued that it has become reified and taken as a universal ideology (Tsing 2000): a ‘common sense of the times’ (Peck and Tickell 2002, 381). It is often defined in terms of free market ideology and deregulation. However, Harvey (2007) argued that neoliberalism is much more than just free market ideology. Whereas it is often explained in terms of the reduction of government spending and promotion of the free market to guide the economy and let everything sort itself out, Harvey argued that is not only an economic, but also a deeply political and cultural change as neoliberal thought has become deeply embedded in multiple systems. The belief that entrepreneurial freedom and the free market is a natural solution has seeped into different aspects of society, not only production and industry, but also the social and welfare aspects of the political system and even environmental policy. By rolling back the regulation of the state, health and social care has been opened up to the free market, as this would equally distribute resources (Harvey 2007; Peck and Tickell 2007). The financial means would trickle down and spread to where they were needed and, in the context of environmental policies, protection of the environment would be sorted automatically as protection of the environment would also ensure protection of industrial resources (Patel and Moore 2018). This ideology was not only applied to national scales, but international and even global as well. By pushing for deregulation, rich Western countries could make use of weaker, local markets and economies. This process went hand in hand with globalization and is often used interchangeably with globalization (Eriksen 2016; Harvey 2007).

As mentioned before, the driving force behind climate change are human factors, which is why some scientists argue for calling the current geological era the Anthropocene, the ‘human era’, because humans are leaving their more or less permanent mark on the Earth (Patel and Moore 2018). By calling the current era the Anthropocene, the human cause of climate change is highlighted, they argue. Patel and Moore (2018) stated that the current extinction and destruction rates are much higher than with earlier humans. The deciding changing factor, according to them, is capitalism rather than humans themselves. They argued that ‘Capitalocene’ may therefore be a better-suited term for this era, as it highlights the role of

capitalism as not only an economic system, but a way of organizing relation between humans and nature.

Capitalism constitutes the economic practices following the neoliberalist ideology, but both terms are often used in tandem and even interchangeably (Harvey 2007; Patel and Moore 2018). In their book, Patel and Moore show how capitalism has changed this relation profoundly. For a long time, economy was defined by relations between humans and their natural environment, from which they derived their means of sustenance. There was an interdependence between humans and their environment: if they cared for their environment, their environment would care for them. With the rise of capitalism, this link between society and nature broke. Everything was being commodified. Nature was turned into a resource, instead of something to care for (Latour et al. 2018; Patel and Moore 2018).

Capitalism and neoliberalism were believed to equally distribute costs and benefits evenly, because the invisible hand of the market would even everything out, and capital would ‘trickle down’ from the higher classes to the lower ones (Harvey 2007). However, capitalism, in the form of free market and deregulation ‘did not deliver the goods’ (Eriksen 2016, 473). Social inequality continues to exist and, in most places, increased due to neoliberalist and capitalist practices. This is because capitalism is ridden with contradictions, resulting in crises (Eriksen 2016; Harvey 2007).

The push for capitalism, reducing nature to a resource coincides with ideas of modernization (Latour et al. 2018). Nature was something to be tamed and utilized, instead of something to remain free. This accelerated move towards modernity has resulted in negative implications for the environment. Eriksen (2016) uses the term ‘overheating’ to illustrate this process. Overheating takes place when speed and heat will damage a system, grinding it to a halt. The acceleration of this process could take place in part because of the growing world population and the growing development. All these people want to be connected, want to travel, consume and communicate. This has resulted in an exponential growth in energy use, and the results are seen in the environment in the form of pollution and environmental degradation. There are also implications on the long term, in the form of climate change and depletion of energy sources.

Eriksen (2016) argues that globalization, neoliberalism and capitalism are all ridden with contradictions, creating tension. Globalization would on the one hand lead to a homogenized global identity, but, on the other hand, also highlights local identities and needs (Murray and Overton 2015). As the ideologies of globalization, neoliberalism and capitalism are spread unevenly and differently across the globe, the effects of these processes create highly different outcomes on different scales (Eriksen 2016; Latour et al. 2018; Murray and Overton 2015). Whereas some areas are overheating (whether economically with increased production and profit, or environmentally with higher temperatures) other areas are 'cooling down' (stagnation or decline of the economy).

Contradictions within the ideologies can result into crises, not only social and economic but also environmental, as there is always a tension between economic development and environmental sustainability. This tension is also present in politics, as politicians strive for economic growth, whereas there is a growing global consensus that global climate change is largely due to human activity. The strive for economic growth leans heavily on the utilization of fossil fuels. As a matter of fact, the industrial revolution, leading to the hegemony of capitalism was not possible without the discovery of fossil fuels. According to Eriksen (2016), because of these contradictions, we are locked onto a path of destruction, as our path of progress, development and growth will lead to our demise. The system will overheat and grind to a halt in the form of social and environmental crises. The question how to solve this is, according to Eriksen, the most important one of our time. This thesis will try to answer part of this question by delving into the experiences and knowledge of young climate activists, who try to solve this problem.

These contradictions and tensions lead to stagnation in prevention and mitigation of climate change (Blühdorn 2009; Eriksen 2016). In politics, economic and environmental needs are constantly being assessed, as choosing for one often has negative impacts on the other. There is a constant battle between choosing growth and sustainability; and to make the situation even more complex, there are different outcomes on different scales. Eriksen (2016) defines this struggle as follows: "A cooler world, both in a literal and a metaphorical sense, would by default be slower, less materially affluent and less prolific than the one we currently inhabit.

It may also be more multicentric, decentralized and diverse than that of hegemonic neoliberalism. In any case, the potential for the realization of a less overheated world depends on the outcome of the multiple scalar clashes currently pitting local concerns against translocal interests." (485). The struggle between sustainability and economic growth continues to hamper sustainable political decision-making.

Climate activists often cited the reports of the IPCC (2014) and other scientific articles as a basis for their narrative, focusing on the cause of climate change, namely human actions. This scientific research and critical view on capitalism and neoliberalism is used as the foundation for their narrative. The following paragraphs focus on the rest of the narrative of the climate activists by focusing on the role of politics, large corporations and the possible solutions to the climate change crisis.

### **"No More Empty Promises"**

The environment has been put at the top of national and international agendas since the release of Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth*, and the IPCC Reports (2014) showing the disastrous effects of climate change. Blühdorn (2009) argues that 'never before had environmental policy been based on such unambiguous categorical imperatives, derived not from contested aesthetic or ethical norms, but based on the soundest and most authoritative science available.' (1). There was no doubt about the negative impacts climate change would have on the Earth and its inhabitants; many scientific reports have pointed in that direction for decades. However, large scale policy overhaul stayed out (Blühdorn 2009; Eriksen 2016).

According to climate activists, the means to solve the climate crisis are present; there is just an unwillingness to actively use them. It has been five years since the Paris Agreement was signed in 2016 and seven years since the critical 1.5 degrees report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was published (2014). However, concrete actions still need to be taken by most national governments (Blühdorn 2009; Eriksen 2016). Governments are still doing business as usual, instead of making progressive steps towards green and sustainable policies. Politics is more committed to continuity instead of change, which can be highlighted by the fact that most politicians are more concerned with energy *security* rather than new ways of providing energy. The lifestyles we currently have, have become non-negotiable, and

politics is more concerned with securing and sustaining these lifestyles and wishes for growth and development, which have proven to be unsustainable, instead of ensuring a sustainable economy (Blühdorn 2009; Eriksen 2016).

In her article, Blühdorn (2009) has highlighted reasons why politics is slow when it comes to creating real sustainable policies. For the economy, as well as for individual consumers, environmental efforts simply do not pay. Costs are put off as long as possible, and legislation that would require green investments to be made is not imposed. This is because the new paradigm of sustainability has not broken from the traditional models of economic growth. The fuzziness of the concept of sustainability is also one of the reasons environmentally sound policies are difficult to develop. Sustainability does not only entail sustainability for the environment, but also sustainability for the economy, as can be seen in the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN, which strive for environmental, social and economic sustainability at the same time (United Nations n.d.). However, economic and environmental requirements are often contradictory, which limits the creation of environmentally sustainable policies, as economy is often put first. (Eriksen 2016; Bluhdorn 2009).

Another reason is the belief that, eventually, innovation will occur and new technologies will provide a solution to the problem (Blühdorn 2009; Eriksen 2016). This ideology of ecological modernization is based on the idea that neoliberalism will lead to innovation, as climate change is harmful to industries and thus needs to be solved in order to reach the highest profits. Environmental issues could be expressed in monetary terms and the costs and benefits will be weighed, creating a balance between economic gains and environmental protection. However, key environmental problems cannot be expressed in monetary terms, as specific environmental problems require specific solutions and not a ‘one size fits all’ plan (Blühdorn 2009).

At the core of Blühdorn’s (2009) argument is the fact that environmental policies are being framed around preserving the way we currently live, centered around a capitalist system and mindset. The new ecological industrial politics, which is often used by politicians, frames climate change as an opportunity for more innovation, growth and profit. These new technologies and industries are framed as the solution to climate change but are at their core

just a way to keep doing what we are already doing, which is proven to be unsustainable. The lifestyles we have become accustomed to (fast fashion, eating meat, individualisation, high levels of energy consumption, etc.) have become non-negotiable, which makes environmental sustainability impossible to reach (Blühdorn 2009).

Many climate activists I have met, also expressed their frustration with capitalism, or ‘the system’, as they often called it. According to them, politicians are more concerned with their popularity and financial gains, instead of focusing on solving the current climate crisis. Policies are being framed protecting constant economic growth, without realizing - or worse, realizing and not doing anything - that the drive for economic growth is what drives the climate crisis. During the demonstrations, many activists have told me that capitalism was the main reason for climate change. Some argued that capitalism needed to be overthrown and argued for a communist or Marxist system. Some of the activists I met at FFF Amsterdam were proud to call themselves a Marxist or communist and believed that the solution would be in a more equal political system not driven on economic growth. Others would remain more in the middle on this debate; they did declare that the drive for economic growth and consumerism was a key cause for climate change, but did not want to overthrow the entire political system. What was present with all activists I have met, was a sense that the international political system did not care enough about climate change and needed to take accountability and action, as soon as possible. The activists believed that the solution of the climate crisis was available, only the people in power, the politicians, did not care enough to take action.

After the elections, the formation process has started in the Netherlands, which means it is time to look forward to creating policies for the next four years. For the first time, youth were invited to talk to the politicians and plead for a sustainable policy. The Jonge Klimaatbeweging was invited to have a conversation with the current prime minister and the formator, the mediator between different political parties whose task it is to make them come to an agreement for a new government coalition and core leading policies or principles. The JKB pleaded for ‘sustainable political leadership’ meaning 65% reduction of emissions in 2030, a

crisis approach including a climate authority and real systemic change.<sup>17</sup> During the corona crisis, the Dutch government quickly created policies and had a special team to advise and control the government, the Outbreak Management Team (OMT). This showed climate activists that the government *was* able to take quick actions when confronted with a crisis. The question than arose: why not apply the same crisis approach to the climate crisis? This is why the JKB pleaded for the creation of a climate authority, or as they call it ‘the OMT for climate’. This authority would hold the government accountable for their promises and targets.

The empty promises made by politicians were also a reason for a dedicated action by Fridays for Future, March 19<sup>th</sup>. Across the world, national Fridays for Future organizations knocked on doors of their national governments and thanked them for ‘nothing’ (Fridays for Future 2021b). In the Netherlands, a small group of Dutch Fridays for Future activists were present in front of the parliament building, giving a speech to thank the politicians and offering them a gift box full of... nothing. “As you can see the box is empty, just like your promises and nice words.”<sup>18</sup> They told the politicians that they, the activists, did do their homework, giving the government concrete plans to fix the climate crisis: stopping investments into fossil fuels immediately, limit CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and use a clear CO<sub>2</sub> budget, based on current scientific research and a just shared responsibility between all countries. They urged the government to create a climate policy which considers everyone, including the most vulnerable, and to treat ecocide as a



Figure 3 Picture of the “No More Empty Promises” protest, @fridaysforfuturenederland, March 19<sup>th</sup> 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMnf8MKHg6T/>

<sup>17</sup> Tweet by the chair of the JKB, <https://twitter.com/SchoutenWerner/status/1395268132944683008>.

<sup>18</sup> Speech at the No More Empty Promises protest, March 19<sup>th</sup> 2021, video on Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMtxDDvH3kb/>.

crime. At the end of the speech, they urged politicians to be brave and make bold choices and to acknowledge they were wrong. “We can still fix the problem. It is too late for promises. It is time for action!”

### [“Shell is a fine company, if I believe the website”<sup>19</sup>](#)

According to the climate movement, another cause of climate change is large corporations striving for profit instead of a liveable and healthy planet. At the root of the problem is the current system: capitalism. “[The current system] is the big problem everything can be traced back to.”<sup>20</sup> Because of capitalism, the environment is second to the economy and choices are being made to make large profits at the cost of the environment and human rights. More and more products get manufactured and sold across the globe, resulting in depletion of resources and landfills and oceans full of waste, most notably plastic and microplastics.

One of the main villains in the narrative of the climate activists is Shell, especially in the Netherlands. This becomes visible in the large anti-Shell signs present at most protests and demonstrations. Dutch Royal Shell was founded June 16<sup>th</sup>, 1890, and grew to be one of the biggest oil corporations across the globe. It has the official label ‘Royal’ meaning it is officially supported by the Dutch king (Koninklijk Huis n.d.). When you open the Shell homepage (<https://www.shell.nl>) one of the first things you will see is their commitment to sustainability: “clean energy and a strong economy. Shell wants to contribute to this too.”.<sup>21</sup> However, the climate activists do not agree. They state that Shell is only striving for profit, with disastrous effects for people and nature across the globe, most notably marginalized communities and countries with less regulations and ways to defend themselves. Despite Shell acknowledging the dangers of climate change 30 years ago, the company still invests in fossil fuels (Mommers

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<sup>19</sup> Translated song lyrics from “Shell is een prima bedrijf (als ik de website mag geloven)” by Hangouth,

<https://open.spotify.com/track/5HC5jTe2yGDmvH5xWiv3MH?si=507820d11fbf4c7f>

<sup>20</sup> Interview April 15<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Homepage Shell, accessed on June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2021, <https://www.shell.nl/>



Figure 4 Picture of a poster hung up by the Shell Must Fall group in preparation for the international Shell Must Fall Day, May 23rd 2021, picture from @Shellmustfall Instagram, April 1st 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNIVkfaFB0I/>.



Figure 5 Picture of the marriage between Shell and Rutte, picture from @NLRebellion Twitter, July 2nd 2021, <https://twitter.com/NLRebellion/status/1410952061282308099>.

2017). The company is in the top 20 of companies which contributed the most to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions since 1965 (The Guardian 2019). Furthermore, the company is actively holding back climate policies (Mommers 2017) through its influence on governments, which is made easier by the official label of 'Royal'. There is substantial evidence of Shell's role in human rights abuses in Nigeria where Shell requested the Nigerian state security forces to deal with non-violent protesters and the large-scale environmental pollution with 340 oil spills in one year in Nigeria. Instead of taking responsibility, Shell decides to not address the pollution and keeps on drilling (Frynas 2003), and when regulations are too tight somewhere, Shell moves somewhere else.

The influence large corporations have on political decision-making was often expressed as a reason for concern by my respondents. Large corporations lobbying with politicians to sway policies in their

favor was noted as hampering sustainable policymaking and results in citizens being unheard by politicians. Extinction Rebellion dedicated an entire action day to the ‘marriage’ between Shell and Rutte. Through lobbying, corporations can insert themselves in the relationship between state and citizen and divert attention from citizens to their own corporate agenda (Anastasiadis 2006). By influencing political processes, companies can steer policies to be more favorable to them; for example, in the form of tax breaks. What makes lobbying especially threatening for citizens, is the lack of transparency often associated with it: lobbying is often thought of to take place behind closed doors (Anastasiadis 2006). By highlighting the political power corporations have through informational posts and action days, the climate movement wants to urge politicians to listen to citizens and take their needs into account, needs that are often more sustainable than the needs and wishes of corporations striving for economic gains.

Because the distrust towards large corporations is so high, when companies implement sustainable policies, this is often thought of as greenwashing. It is important to note, however, that there are oil and gas companies that invest in renewable energy sources, Shell being one of them. Companies have partnered with the IPCC and have supported climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies (Bach 2019; Pattberg and Widerberg 2016). The role of oil and gas as energy sources will in the future become less and companies must invest in other sources to remain competitive. The role of oil and gas companies in the transition to renewable energy and a low-carbon future is still unsure, as many companies are slowly starting to get into renewable energy sources only recently (Bach 2019). It is important to keep monitoring their development of strategies to see if they can earn the trust of the climate movement and become truly sustainable.

## Spreading the message

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, in order to reach new potential members for a movement, their message needs to be spread. For the climate movement, much of this happens online, where memes and informational posts on social media play a large part in spreading information and can be used as an easy and understandable way into the narrative of the movement. Memes (jokes and funny pictures spread online) can be an entertaining way to highlight social issues and poke fun at villains, such as politicians and the CEOs of large companies. The recent space travels from billionaires like Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk were, for example, inspiration for many memes, criticizing the polluting nature and wastefulness of these short trips to space.



Figure 6 Meme about space travel, picture from @politieke\_jongeren Instagram, August 10<sup>th</sup> 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CSYtTFIIgAO/>.

Besides memes, another type of social media post is used to spread the narrative: informational posts. These posts, often used on Instagram, provide information on a variety of topics. Due to the format of Instagram, which focuses on small square pictures, only limited amounts of text can be used to fit the square frames. This results in small slide shows, dividing complex social topics up into a couple of bullet points and short sentences. These posts make it easy to read about a variety of topics and learn something while scrolling through your social media feed. The limited size, however, can result in complex matters being overly simplified and condensed, leaving out important details or different perspectives. This problem is often, although not always, solved by providing links to longer articles in the post's caption.

Social media posts like memes and the informational posts, can provide an easy way into the narrative and can be useful to get started as part of the climate movement. Spreading the

message of the climate movement profoundly relates to the question of what makes an activist, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 3: When is someone an activist?

When discussing climate change activism, or any type of activism, it is important to be clear on what is considered ‘activism’. In academia, there often is no clear definition of activism, if activism has been defined at all. Activism is often regarded as a part of political participation, which I discussed in chapter 1. In that chapter I discussed the definitions Barrett and Pachi (2019) delineated for various concepts also used in my research connected to the question on the definition of ‘activism’. These concepts are political engagement and participation, as well as Isin’s (2009) acts of citizenship. Demonstrating and protesting are defined as non-conventional methods of political participation, as they are taking place outside of the electoral system but still aim to influence politics. The aim of activism is to influence politics by influencing politicians and the policies around a certain topic, in this case climate change.

At the same time, climate change activism is also centered around raising awareness for the effects of climate change and installing a sense of urgency to act among people, not just politicians. By creating awareness and a sense of urgency in others, they will also support the movement, creating more pressure on politicians to change policies. By influencing politics to set sustainable policies in place, activists aim to create a safe future, mitigating the extreme weather effects climate change will create. Following Isin’s (2009) framework of acts of citizenship, activism consists of a series of acts of citizenship, making claim to certain rights, in this case, the right to a safe future without harm from climate change and the right to have a say in processes to create this safe future. By combining these two definitions, activism can be studied as a way of political participation that enables people to make claims to the right of a safe future and to have a say in this future.

However, as an anthropologist, it is also critical to explore the emic perspective: the way my respondents themselves perceive and define activism. Does one need to be at every rally and have heated debates with people with different views? Or does simply being sustainable in your everyday life count as activism? During my fieldwork, I asked my respondents on multiple occasions what they consider activism and what makes someone an activist. I also asked if they thought of themselves as activists and all of them subscribed to this label. This chapter focuses on the definitions of activism I found during my fieldwork and the different types of

activism, ranging from ‘diehards’ to ‘medium’ activists. I also discuss the different strategies for getting your message out there and the role of intersectionality in the climate movement, as this turned out to be a critical concept for my respondents.

### Unreflected wokeness

Not everyone who talks about climate change is automatically an activist. According to one of my respondents from the weekly Fridays for Future strikes, Nicolas, people often have often something he calls ‘unreflected wokeness’, where, even though people are becoming more conscious about social and environmental issues, this does not lead to concrete action. During demonstrations and our conversations, Nicolas was always very outspoken about a large variety of topics. Originally from Germany but now living in Amsterdam, he knew a lot about both the Dutch and German climate movement and being an outspoken pacifist and anarchist who does not shy away from provocative statements created some interesting discussions. He was also critical about people who were only superficially interested in social movements and, according to him, were more in it for themselves.

“It is also a liberalization thing, I think. Because you have people becoming more conscious: ‘yeah, Black Lives Matter!’ and stuff, but they still vote, I don’t know, Volt and stuff like that. It is like, kind of left, but also like ‘ah, free market. I don’t want to give up eating meat, I want to go on vacation in, I don’t know, fucking Australia. And like, this unreflected wokeness.”<sup>22</sup>

According to him, unreflected wokeness is the situation when someone is conscious about a topic but does not take concrete steps to actively do something about it. The term woke means someone is aware of injustices, whether racial, economic, based on gender etc. (Jacobs 2017). It is derived from ‘waking up’, meaning that someone has woken up to how unjust the world is and wants to change this. Nowadays, the word is mostly used satirical, like Nicolas used it in the interview, criticizing people who are woke for the sake of being woke, instead of actually “doing the hard work”. Following Barrett and Pachi’s (2019) definitions, they would be politically engaged but not politically participating.

“They repost it in their stories and that’s it. People who kind of support a social movement, but then also never bother to follow through,” Nicolas sighed.<sup>23</sup> He is frustrated by people

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<sup>22</sup> Interview April 17<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Interview April 17<sup>th</sup> 2021.

acting like they are concerned for the movement, but are not actually taking concrete steps to help the movement. Without proper reflection on your actions, you cannot better yourself and better the future, is his thinking.

### Spreading the message

When asked about activism, one key factor of activism was mentioned by all my respondents. In order to be an activist, one needs to engage in discussions and tell others about their standpoint. You need to educate others on the ways that someone can be sustainable. Heleen, a girl I met through a message to JMA, who has been a vegan for years and whose sister has become a vegetarian inspired by her actions, gave me an example:

"I think that people who don't eat meat, and go into discussions about this with others, yeah, I think that is the most important thing about being an activist. Look, eh, my sister for example, she is a vegetarian, but then she doesn't talk to anyone about it, and I don't think that is really activist. But if you make the choice to stop eating meat, or stop doing something else, and share that with others to show: 'hey, you can do it the way I do'", I think that is activist. To, eh, well persuade may not be the right word, but to show people like, 'hey, you can do the things in your daily life and that doesn't have to be at demonstrations, that is also possible with a simple post on your stories of about something you care about.' As long as you enter into a dialogue with others and talk about it, that is activism to me."<sup>24</sup>

For Heleen, engaging in discussions and spreading information and tips about sustainability were what set activists apart from people who are just trying to be sustainable.

Spreading awareness and educating people was often cited as one of the motivations behind protests and strikes. Spreading awareness was often also done by posting about environmental injustices, such as videos of slaughterhouses<sup>25</sup> and oil spills in sea<sup>26</sup>, and articles

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<sup>24</sup> Interview March 15<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Interview March 15<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Tweet on the ruptured pipeline, setting the sea on fire, July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2021,  
<https://twitter.com/Dumbassactivist/status/1411098484233621504>.

on forest fires<sup>27</sup> on social media, or through the informational posts mentioned in the previous chapters. For some of my respondents, seeing these posts made them get into environmental activism. Heleen told me that because of a video of a slaughterhouse on Instagram, she started to read into it more and that is how her journey in activism started. Now, she tries to do the same by posting on her Instagram in the hope that her posts ignite a spark in someone else, just like it did with her. “I hope that the people that I know and are not really involved in this, that they slowly start thinking ‘ah yes, this article Heleen posted or that thingy, that was really interesting, actually’ and that they actually start doing something with it.”<sup>28</sup>

Nicolas also thought that by exposing people to the injustices in the world, maybe they would start educating themselves. “You cannot look at the world and not be annoyed and pissed off by it. And I feel like, if you look at enough different problems, you will just become leftist.” According to him, you will see the injustices in the world and become more left in your political views by reading up on things and educating yourself. Nicolas told me that Instagram is a great tool to spark interest and expose people to injustices and activism, but it is then needed that they themselves start educating themselves and actually do something with this knowledge, otherwise they will stick to ‘unreflected wokeness’.

Janna, one of the activists from FFF Amsterdam, told me that by protesting and engaging in conversations with people, she wanted to ‘plant a seed’ in their mind.<sup>29</sup> By this, she meant that, even though people would not start action right away, maybe they would think about her words again later.

Spreading the message of Fridays for Future and the climate movement was also one of the main reasons for the demonstrations every Friday. By being on the Dam square every Friday, the group of FFF Amsterdam wanted to create awareness for climate justice and spread the message of FFF, to push the government towards sustainable policies and give the youth a safe future. After some demonstrations, someone had the idea to bring chalk for the next one,

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<sup>27</sup> Tweet on fires on Cyprus, July 4<sup>th</sup> 2021,  
<https://twitter.com/jensbosman2/status/1411771588773662720> .

<sup>28</sup> Interview March 15<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Interview April 8<sup>th</sup> 2021.

so we could write a message on the pavement, instead of only having our small flags and the one larger flag. The following strikes, we wrote “Fridays for Future” in large, colorful letters on the cobblestones. I was quickly appointed as ‘Chef lettering’ as others were often hesitant about making spelling mistakes or creating ugly letter outlines for the others to fill in. When we were done writing down “Fridays for Future” and adding the Instagram handle of FFF Amsterdam, Janna told us that we should also add “climate justice”, to ensure that people know what we actually stand for. After that, “climate justice” was added every time.

The repetition of being there every Friday seemed to help plant a seed in some people’s minds and people started to recognize us. One Friday, a man walked up to us and told us that he saw us some weeks ago. He praised us for keeping up with the strikes every week and told us we were doing great. He then asked us what our message was and Janna, usually the one to speak to bystanders, answered that we were part of Fridays for Future and were raising awareness for climate change. That day, there were only girls at the demo (Nicolas would arrive later that day) and the man asked us if we were a girls-only group. We laughed and told him that usually there were also boys present, just not that day. The man laughed with us and asked if he could take a picture. We put on our masks as a COVID measure, moved closer together to fit in the frame and raised our flags. When he took the picture and checked if it was all right, he told us that he would send the picture to his nephew to inspire him to maybe also join FFF. It looked like we had planted a seed and spread the message.

#### *“Activism is no activism without intersectionality”<sup>30</sup>*

When scrolling through my Instagram stories, I noticed that Julia, the girl I met in front of the parliament building, posts multiple Instagram stories<sup>31</sup> a day, often about a variety of topics. She discusses things like birth control, the Israel/Palestine conflict, feminism, Black Lives Matter, and many more topics. When I asked her about this, she told me that this was because of intersectionality. When I visited her during her strike in front of the parliament building, she told me a similar thing. The climate crisis is connected to many different social issues, not

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<sup>30</sup> Interview April 15<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Instagram stories are photos or videos someone posts on their Instagram that are only visible for 24 hours.

just environmental ones. And the ones who are hit the hardest by climate change are not the ones that pollute the most; they are the ones that are marginalized and vulnerable.

"The climate fight needs to be an intersectional movement, and if we just fix climate, we are not there yet. We want climate justice and that includes social justice. So, not just justice for white, rich people, but also for everyone else. Eh, and unless we actively move to make sure we achieve that equality and that we take everyone into account, it won't happen. It is not something we take into account accidentally, because you already see that less fortunate groups are being hit much harder by climate change. Eh, so we need to commit to help these groups actively through this. And apart from this, equality is so incredibly important to me. Human rights are so incredibly important. So even if I don't say it from the climate story perspective, I still find it so important that everyone deserves equal rights and we need to devote ourselves against racism, sexism, transphobia and everything else. It is as simple as that. Yes, it shouldn't be so hard to be against sexism or something, but yeah, apparently, a lot of people find that difficult."<sup>32</sup>

She told me that you need to be actively committed to a better world for everyone.

"So, if you call yourself a feminist while you only actively commit to white able-bodied women, I don't think you are a feminist or activist, because you are only committed to a very small group of people and exclude the others, eh, and people that have it harder. So I think that it is also about inclusivity. Because activism is no activism without intersectionality."<sup>33</sup>

Julia was not the only one who was dedicated to an intersectional approach to climate change activism, as most of my respondents were active against different social issues, and even though some did not explicitly call it 'intersectional', I believe it often is an intersectional movement. Within the WhatsApp group of FFF Amsterdam, different topics than climate change were often discussed. People would also share invites to different types of protests, ranging from protests against police violence in Colombia to Black Lives Matter.

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<sup>32</sup> Interview April 15<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Interview April 15<sup>th</sup> 2021.

I also discussed diversity within climate movements with Nicolas during his interview. He told me that he liked Fridays for Future as it was a much more diverse and non-Western organization. Fridays for Future has units across the globe and many of the international decisions are made in non-Western countries. He compared the diversity within Fridays for Future with the diversity within Extinction Rebellion, which, according to him, is a much more white organization.

The concept of intersectionality has been coined by professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to explain how race, gender, class and other characteristics intersect and overlap (Cooper 2016). The concept, rooted in Black feminism, highlights how people from different backgrounds have different experiences, which means it is critical to listen to a variety of people to create coherent and holistic research and policies. By using the concept in the context of climate activism, Julia and others highlight the diverse impacts climate change has on people, and most notably how it disproportionately impacts indigenous people and people who are not the polluters. This is also where the term ‘climate justice’ comes from. By striving for climate justice, the movement strives for protection for all, most notably the most vulnerable, for example, indigenous people whose lifeworld is threatened by deforestation.

### Types of activists: from diehard to behind the scenes

People also mentioned different types of activists. Often Extinction Rebellion (XR) was mentioned as being more radical and diehard with demonstrations like storming a milk factory<sup>34</sup> to call for a shift towards plantbased industries, or glueing their hands to the walls and doors at Schiphol Airport<sup>35</sup> to call for policies for more sustainable travels. However, that is not the only type of activism there is. “Being an activist is not always just screaming on a square, but also motivating the people around you,” as Sophie put it during an interview.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Tweet, @AnimalRebelsNL, April 17<sup>th</sup> 2021,  
<https://twitter.com/Animalrebelsnl/status/1383460554514210830> and another Tweet,  
@AnimalRebelsNL, April 16<sup>th</sup> 2021,  
<https://twitter.com/Animalrebelsnl/status/138292223401504770>.

<sup>35</sup> Tweet @NLRebellion, December 18<sup>th</sup> 2020,  
<https://twitter.com/NLRebellion/status/1339873122330284037>.

<sup>36</sup> Interview, March 30<sup>th</sup> 2021.

The type of actions of Extinction Rebellion as mentioned above, were often cited as more of a ‘diehard’ kind of activism. Heleen told me she did not feel like she was ‘one of those diehard activists’ but she was more of a ‘medium activist’, where she goes to demonstrations, but does not want to participate in the radical actions of Extinction Rebellion.<sup>37</sup> There were also more supporting activists, who stay behind the scenes and help organize the protests or even people who are only active online and engage in discussions and try to educate people on sustainability and climate justice.

When talking to Nadine, who is an activist at Extinction Rebellion, I learned a lot about the support network surrounding protests. I met Nadine through a mutual friend, and we had a Zoom call to talk about her actions with Extinction Rebellion. As she had been active for only a couple of months, she had just finished the introductory trainings offered by Extinction Rebellion. Before she participated in any protests, she got extensive training to prepare for these actions. There were more general trainings about protesting and briefings about the specific actions and details of the day, but she also received a legal training to prepare if she got arrested. Extinction Rebellion has a legal team she could call. They taught her that even if she got arrested, that does not mean she could not work anywhere anymore, something people sometimes cited as one of the reasons they do not want to participate in the more radical and illegal protests.<sup>38</sup>

A couple of weeks before the interview, she had held her first one-person sit-down protest for XR, where she had a sign on her body and blocked an intersection in Utrecht. Before the protest, a group had scouted a suitable intersection (with a lot of traffic, but not too busy as that could have been dangerous) and a sign had been made for her. During the interview, her sign was next to her and when I asked her what her sign said she proudly showed it to me on camera. “I am terrified that I can’t give a child a future on this planet because of climate change”. Even though it was a one-person sit-down protest, meaning she was the only one blocking the intersection, there was a support team present to help her out during the protest. They talked to bystanders and explained what was happening. Moreover, they filmed the

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<sup>37</sup> Interview, March 15<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Interview, April 27<sup>th</sup> 2021.

entire time she was there to collect evidence if things did go wrong, for example, if a bystander got angry and would attack her. Nadine was quite nervous before the protest, as you put yourself in a vulnerable position sitting down on the street and cars driving up to you. Although it is dangerous, she felt like this needed to be done to raise awareness.<sup>39</sup>

Sophie also told me that she does not feel comfortable with the radical actions of Extinction Rebellion and being ‘on the frontline’, but she still wants to be active in the organization.<sup>40</sup> She decided to join the art team of XR, helping to create the signs and artwork used for demonstrations. By doing this, she felt that she could actively help out the organization, whilst not getting herself into dangerous situations. This illustrates that there are different types of roles in these organizations and different types of activism, such as trainers, support team, organizers, legal teams and art departments. All are valuable nonetheless.

### Climate deniers and conspiracy theorists

Social media has been increasingly used for news consumption and creation (Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018) and in some countries, social media has become the major news source for adults (Shearer and Matsa 2018). Whereas news used to be spread through traditional media, like newspapers, radio or television, with social media, users themselves can post information (Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018). This means that news on social media has not been checked by professional journalists before it is sent out into the world. Because of the lack of fact checking, it is easy for misinformation, described as ‘fake news’, to be spread (Di Domenico et al. 2018). The term ‘fake news’ was popularized during the 2016 US presidential elections, where president Trump called various sources ‘fake news’ (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). Because of the algorithms on social media, user’s behavioral patterns can become amplified, meaning that if someone reads a lot of posts from a fake news source, more posts from this source will end up in their social media feed (Zimmer et al. 2019). At the same time, confirmation bias also plays a role, where people prefer news (whether fake or real) which fits to their own pre-existing opinions. Because of this, it is possible when someone reads a lot of fake news, or items denying climate change, they will be recommended more posts

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<sup>39</sup> Interview, April 27<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Interview, March 30<sup>th</sup> 2021.

surrounding these topics, thus feeding into their theories (Zimmer et al. 2019). The confirmation bias was also present in discussions with climate change deniers, as they would often not listen to arguments made by the activists or would immediately deny them.

By protesting in public, an activist puts themselves in a spot where they can be scrutinized and where people can come up to them to engage in discussions. These conversations could be had with people asking questions about the cause or the movement, but often climate change deniers would take the opportunity to disagree with the message of the activists. At the FFF Amsterdam demonstrations, climate change deniers and people who believed in conspiracy theories often came up to us to tell us how we were promoting ‘green propaganda from the government’ or how ‘big pharma is behind climate change to keep people ill’. Surprisingly, most of the times, the people that talked to us about this, could spin the conversation towards vaccines and how they are harmful to people (just like the men who talked to Olaf and me in the vignette at the start of chapter 1) or how the corona measures were an infringement on their freedom and how people were sheep for following them. Sometimes, people from FFF tried to engage in the discussion, giving their arguments on why it is important to combat climate change and even why vaccines are good for people.

During the discussions, I did not join the conversation and stood by to listen to both sides of the story. Often one or two people from FFF would discuss with the men (interestingly, they were always men) and others would either stand and listen or move a bit further away from the discussion and have their own conversation with other demonstrators. The discussions often resulted in activists getting called naïve, getting laughed at and a plea to do our own research. After these conversations, people often sighed and needed to vent their frustrations to each other and to me. They found it tiring that people simply did not agree with scientific facts and still managed to call climate change a hoax, even with the amount of scientific research done on the topic.

During our conversation, I mentioned to Julia how draining it could be to listen to these people, even if I was not the one engaging in the discussion. She told me that sometimes it can be best to approach it as a conversation and not a way to ‘be right’ about everything.

"What you learn quite soon, is that you need to stop to try and convince people. Or, it's like that for me. When I get into a conversation with a climate change denier or something, then it doesn't work if you go in there to convince the other, because the other tries to convince you as well and then you only try to get your own points across. And if you are like 'I'm just talking about this topic' then you will actually get farther and it is actually less frustrating, because you... you don't have the goal to convince someone, so you cannot fail. That is my strategy. Like, try to inform someone and not to convince someone and really listen to what they say and answer to that and don't get angry, because that really doesn't work."<sup>41</sup>

These types of discussions can also happen online. Julia received hate comments on her posts and her comments under news stories on social media. People called her a leftist and feminist and wrote things like "oh, she probably studies gender studies", making fun of her comments. She told me that sometimes you just should not pay too much attention to certain people and focus your energy on other things. During the interview, she sighed and wondered: "But I really wonder, like, how much effect do these people that go to these things, think they have when they say 'climate change is not real'. Do they think that we just say, 'oh ok, I was a bit confused for a minute, thanks for this change. I'm going, bye'?"<sup>42</sup>

By closing herself off from certain comments, Julia tried to maintain her mental health. Activism could become stressful for most of my respondents, as they had to find time in between school, friends, hobbies and the demands parents placed on them. The balance between activism, school, your social life and your mental health will be explored in the next chapter.

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<sup>41</sup> Interview, April 15<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Interview, April 15<sup>th</sup> 2021.

## Chapter 4: A balancing act

Janna joins us at the Friday strike. She sighs when she gets off her bike and sets down her bag on the ground. “I am so stressed,” she announces as she sighs again. “My whole Kung Fu group is angry at me.” I ask her why and she tells me that they got angry that she is not at the training often enough. Wednesdays, she often has meetings for FFF, Fridays are the strikes and on Sundays it is time for homework (“and I also want some free time sometimes!”). She asks what she should do and mentions that her grades for maths are not up to par either. She has a load of homework to do when she gets home, and she does not understand anything about maths. “No worries,” one of the FFF people says to her. “I’m good at math, I can help you out”. They hug and Janna’s worries seem to slowly fade away a bit.

When I asked her about what her parents think of the climate strikes every Friday, Janna told me that her parents found it “very ambitious” and just before the interview, she had a discussion with her parents about it. Her report card came in earlier that day and her grades for maths were not as good as she had hoped. Her parents asked her if it was really necessary for her to be at the Dam square every Friday. “Well, I have my priorities and Fridays for Future is higher on that list than schoolwork,” she had responded. Her priorities did not line up with her parents and this created friction.<sup>43</sup>

One of the topics often discussed at FFF strikes was dealing with homework and tests. Sometimes someone would join later because they had music lessons, or someone would just send a text in the WhatsApp group: “Sorry, guys, waaaaay too much homework!” During my fieldwork, I often wondered (and sometimes wondered out loud) where they find the time for school, sports, hobbies, meetings, strikes, organizing demos and having an active social media presence. The young climate activists I met all have busy lives and when I asked them for an interview, an answer I often received was something like ‘I don’t know if I have time, but there must be a moment we can have a chat!’ They often wanted to talk to me, but finding a moment in between meetings, school and demonstrations could prove difficult. Luckily Zoom-calls made it easier, as I could call in-between meetings and online classes.

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<sup>43</sup> Interview, April 8<sup>th</sup> 2021.

This chapter focuses on how these young activists fit activism in their daily lives and how this creates friction as the limited time in their day has to be divided between school, social lives, activism, hobbies and parents. The first section focuses on how activism can be combined with a social life, whereas the second section highlights the pressure activism can create on activists' mental health.

### Activism can be fun too

When finding a balance between school and activism, I found that some activistic activities are deemed more important than others. Things like long weekly meetings are easier to skip than the large, national demonstrations, which take months of preparation. This hierarchy is not the same for all activists, but I found that the smaller things are easier to miss and skipping them makes people feel less guilty than with the larger protests, which are often looked forward to and are also a fun thing to do, not just a necessity.

Activism is often a social and fun thing to do. The strikes are a way to meet each other and to have a chat and a laugh. On Fridays, TV shows and music were often being discussed, in between the debates on communism, squatting and climate change. Meetings can also be combined with fun activities, such as picnics or potluck dinners. During the summer, it is common for the FFF Amsterdam meetings to be a picnic instead of a Zoom call and to discuss organizational as well as fun things.

There are also a variety of group chats young activists can take part in. A lot of internal communication is through WhatsApp (or Telegram for international communication) and besides the standard group chat, there are also 'spam chats' and 'gezelligheidschats' (chats for fun), where funny memes, jokes and the like can be shared. Julia told me that she is part of a lot of these chats, and that she also has a chat with a friend group she formed through activism. Luca, a German climate activist I met through Nicolas, told me he has weekly movie nights with friends from activism and that they share a Discord<sup>44</sup> server together, where they regularly chat with each other.

Even though they chat a lot, meeting friends from activism can sometimes be a difficult thing to do, especially if they do not live close to you. Julia told me that she only meets the people

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<sup>44</sup> Discord is a platform where people can have servers (similar to groups or forums) where people can talk using text messages, voice or video calls.

from her friend group a couple of times a year, because they are all so busy with school and activism. Especially since some of them live far away, it can be difficult to meet up in real life. She also mentioned that she has some international friendships as well.

"Yeah, it sounds fun, but actually it can also really suck, because you never see them. Simple as that, you can rarely see them. Especially with a group of climate activists who do not really want to fly or will always avoid flying, which makes it a lot harder. And it is easier for me that a lot of my friends are from Europe. That is a lot closer, but it's not like I would go to Italy for a minute."<sup>45</sup>

Even though they could talk online to each other, in-person contact was still valued, although it is difficult to match up their busy schedules and find time to meet up. This is even harder when the friend group is dispersed across countries and sometimes even continents.

### A way to cope

Activism can also be a way to cope with the pressure of the current climate crisis and the uncertain future. It is a feeling that the world is falling to pieces, and activism is a way to 'at least do something'.<sup>46</sup> Some consider this pressure a climate depression, although most of my respondents did not call it that.

Janna told me that she constantly heard about global warming on the news, which made her very sad. Her mother then offered the idea to join an action group. By joining the climate movement, activists could at least gain some control over their future. By demonstrating, debating and striking, there is this feeling that they are at least *trying* their best to fix the problem, which is for a large part out of their hands. Through activism, Janna told me she found some peace of mind.

Heleen mentioned that sometimes she feels guilty for the unsustainable things in her life, before she started activism.<sup>47</sup> She felt ashamed that she had eaten meat before, and even though she knows that, at the time, she did not know better, sometimes she would try to make up for it, by living as sustainably as possible now. All my respondents were incorporating sustainability in their daily lives, either by not eating meat, not driving and taking public

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<sup>45</sup> Interview, April 15<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Interview, April 8<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Interview, March 15<sup>th</sup> 2021.

transport, or saving food from the landfill. Although most of them found that the climate crisis is for the most part the fault of failing governments and large businesses (like Shell), they also felt that they could still make a small impact with their individual choices. Something I often heard was ‘alle beetjes helpen’ ('every little bit helps').

When I talked to Julia after the elections, she told me that she was feeling tired after all the commotion and protesting before the elections. Now that they were done, she was giving herself some time to rest and gain some energy, especially since her final examinations were coming up soon. She told me that instead of going to protests, she was mostly keeping busy with organizational stuff within Fridays for Future. You can't always be in the frontline, sometimes you need to rest too, was her reasoning. After the spring rebellion, a series of protest and actions, Extinction Rebellion posted a similar thing on their social media. They expressed the need for their activists to rest and regain some energy, before diving into the autumn rebellion later this year.

Surrounding oneself with like-minded people can also be a way to guard your mental health. As discussed in chapter 3, engaging in debates with people with different views can often be draining. By surrounding yourself with people who share the same views, it can be easier to have conversations without constantly having to defend yourself and your views. It is important to know when not to engage in discussions and when you just need a chat with close friends.

## Conclusion

It is the last Friday before the end of my fieldwork period. In my bag I have the chalk to write slogans on the pavement, a Fridays for Future flag and white chocolate cookies I baked to say thank you to all the climate activists I encountered in the field. When I walk around the corner I already see a couple of bikes parked on the square. I walk closer and wave to the two activists who are already present.

"Hi!" one of them greets me. I zip open my bag to take out the chalk and when I reach for the cookies, the eyes of the activist start to glimmer. "Ooh, you brought food!" he exclaims happily.

I nod. "Yes, this will be the last time for a while that I'll be here."

He frowns. "You're done researching your lab rats?" he laughs.

"Yes, and now it's time to write all this down."

Soon the rest of the group starts arriving and the strike continues as usual: we write a slogan down on the pavement, take a photo for the Instagram page and discuss various topics. The cookies turn out to be a good way to tell the group I will be leaving again. At the end of the strike, we are standing in a circle as I give the chalk and flag to an activist. The conversation is about friendships. Janna, who is standing next to me, looks up to me and smiles. "Yeah, you're one of my friends too."

I smile.

"Even though you're ten years older."

We all laugh and say our goodbyes. I promise to keep in touch and join the summer picnic in August. We all wave goodbye as they ride away on their bikes and I walk to the train station.

In three months, I have learned a lot from the activists I have met. Through the conversations, interviews and online posts, I have learned how they frame climate change. It is their future being discussed, but they feel neglected by politicians and corporations. Large corporations like Shell, the economic system based on capitalism and a lacking government are all causes of the climate crisis. The tools to fix the problem are here, they are just not being used, according to the activists.

Through activism, youth claim their citizenship. They protest and post to push people to vote sustainably, using conventional methods of political participation. Where these conventional methods are not available due to the age of the activists, non-conventional methods are being used. By protesting and striking, they aim to create awareness and urge the government to take responsibility for their future. Their age is not just an obstacle limiting their ways to claim citizenship, it can also create opportunities in the shape of online literacy and large networks, both online and offline. By using activism as an act of citizenship, youth can make a claim on their right to a safe future and to have a say in their future.

Activism is an act of citizenship, a way to participate and influence politics, and a key factor for this is creating a discussion. This can be done at protests, engaging with climate deniers or with family around the dining table when discussing eating meat. Even posting a funny yet critical meme can be a way to create awareness and influence people and thus be an act of citizenship.

The arrival of the internet was often thought to become more important than offline communication (Eriksen 2015; Miller and Slater 2003), and the COVID pandemic offered a valuable insight in a world where online communication had become vital. Meetings and mobilization calls were held online, just like the debates in preparation of the elections. Livestreams were organized to watch demonstrations from home, because only small groups of protesters were allowed to come together due to the corona measures. With all this taking place online, the ‘real’ feeling of protesting was not able to be replicated. School strikes and demonstrations were still mostly organized on squares not social media platforms, and coming together was still expressed as an important aspect of activism. Social media was used as a tool to help organize the offline demonstrations, but the key aspect of demonstrating was still offline. Where social media excelled at however, was spreading the message of the climate movement and to help people become aware of certain social issues. A single post on social media could be the start of a journey in activism. To actually become an activist, however, it is important to take the next step from being aware to spreading awareness, reflect on your own actions and not be ‘unreflected woke’.

As the world is still in the midst of the COVID pandemic, it is interesting to explore where activism will go in the post-pandemic world. Will online activism become more important as people are wary of large gatherings or will people quickly go back to offline protests?

Another interesting field of research would be the differences between Dutch and German activism. During the weekly FFF strikes, I often talked to Nicolas, who is originally from Germany. He often expressed his frustration with the lack of Dutch protesters. Planning a protest as large as the Climate Alarm took months in the Netherlands, whereas a similar protest in Germany would be arranged in weeks, according to him. There were also often more protesters during demonstrations, as well as anti-right counterprotests when extreme right-wing demonstrations were taking place. I did not gather a lot of data on this, as it was beyond the scope of my thesis, however, it would be an interesting case to compare the differences in activist culture in the Netherlands and Germany, as well as the differences between left and right wing protests.

Last week, the 2021 IPCC report was published (IPCC 2021). Within hours, my social media feed was full of posts and comments about the report and all different Dutch news outlets were reporting on the report and its implications for policy. The publishing of the report put the balance between activism and mental health on edge for many of my participants, and my social media feed was full of expressions of frustration and sadness. Politicians who were suddenly saying policies are needed to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, while calling climate activists 'climate naggers' ('klimaatdrammers') a few years ago, were being called out on Twitter. Others were posting that they were staying off social media and news sites for a while because it just made them angry or despondent. The IPCC report highlighted the climate debate for a while, but a couple of days later, news and social media feeds were soon back to their normal news coverage. It will be interesting to explore how climate activists stay resilient even if there is seemingly nothing being done against climate change.

For the future of activism, I argue that offline activism will not be completely replaced by online activism. Online can be useful in spreading the message and organizing a demonstration, but the concrete action of protesting will probably still take place on squares. It is easy to mute a notification on social media, but it is not easy to mute thousands of people outside your door.

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